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AUTHOR Brack, Harold A.
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ABSTRACT

Although listening is a major activity in small group communication, it has received minimal attention. Examination of several books and journals reveals a very sparse treatment of the subject. More attention should be given to listening because it is a key factor in a democratic leadership style and requires different skills than does listening to a single speaker. Suggestions for students interested in learning more about listening in a small group can be made. The section on listening in "The Dynamics of Discussion" by D. C. Barnlund and F. S. Haiman should be made assigned reading. Listening actively, to the whole process, with an appreciation for the worth of each contribution rather than for the purpose of refutation are positive steps in the group listening process. (HKM)

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# Listening - A New Priority In Small Group Process?

Though listening is a major activity in small group communication, it has received minimum attention. Examination of several books and journals reveals a very sparse treatment of the subject. More attention should be given to listening because it is a key factor in a democratic leadership style and requires different skills than listening to a single speaker. Three suggestions are presented for improving listening activity during group discussion.

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Harold A. Brack
Professor of Speech and Homiletics
The Theological School
Drew University
Madison, New Jersey 07940

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Listening - A New Priority In Small Group Process?

Howell and Smith in their book titled Discussion devote their eighteenth chapter to the "Ethics of Discussion." In that chapter they observe that ethical practices facilitate "thoughtful deliberation" while unethical practices are those which obstruct or diminish "reflective thinking." They further note that in making the judgment that a behavior which obstructs or diminishes is unethical, the intention of the participant is crucial. It is necessary to distinguish between what is incompetent and what is unethical.

In this regard it would be difficult to clearly identify types of listening which obstruct and/or diminish group process that are unethical. Accurately assessing motivation or intent would, to say the least, require a highly sophisticated approach.

However, pointing to current instructional literature in the field which tends to create a climate in which unethical listening is more likely to occur does not appear to be as formidable a task. This is particularly true when much of the literature seems to have taken little or no responsibility for adequately equipping people to listen ethically in a way that facilitates "thoughtful deliberation" and "reflective thinking."

The question can at least be raised as to whether we have seriously neglected a potentially major contritution to more ethical discussion and group process. As Howell and Smith suggest, avoidable behavior can be considered unethical for "reasons of careless neglect."

Recently, as a result of some team teaching, I became convinced that more emphasis should be placed on the function of listening when participaing in small groups. When I

reviewed the bibliography for my course in group discussion, I was startled by the impression that the thing we do most in group process has received the least attention. We have concentrated on the speaking and all but ignored the listening.

Yet, unless we are dominating the discussion, leaders and participants spend the major part of their time listening to what others have to say. Furthermore, the value of what we say to the group is directly dependent on how well we have listened to the group. Effective listening is especially crucial for a democratic style of leadership. Indeed, leadership which affirms a democratic climate should provide a good listening model since supportive listening can encourage open, ready participation.

But when you consult the index in Human Interaction In The Small Group Setting by Rosenfeld, the word listening does not appear in the index as a separate listing nor as a sub-listing under leadership nor in connection with any other listing.[1] The same is true of Group Thinking and Conference Leadership by Utterback,[2] and Working in Groups by Stech and Ratliffe.[3]

In both Discussion by Howell and Smith,[4] and Discussion In Human Affairs by McBurney and Hance,[5] listening, again does not appear in the index either as a separate heading or as a sub-heading under leadership. However, Howell and Smith do have an entry "Listening to Discussion" (see Evaluation). Gulley in his Discussion, Conference and Group Process[6] does have a half dozen references to listening indicating that the subject is discussed on seven pages of the 388 page work, but it does not appear as a sub-listing under leadership. Keltner in his Interpersonal Speech-Communication has some significant treatment of listening but none of that discussion appears in his chapter "Interacting with Others: Face to Face in a Small Group."[7]

The Dynamics of Discussion by Barnland and Haiman seemed to hold more promise when I read (on page 266) their observation "It takes two to communicate - one to listen, another to talk. To discuss effectively requires ability to function with some skill in both roles. Since listening is the more

difficult and the least developed of the two, we turn to it first." However, of the 461 pages in the book, only five are devoted to listening.[8]

More recent publications (1979) do not indicate that any significant change is occuring. May I Join You by Beverly A. Gaw and James Edward Sayer focuses on "An Interpersonal Needs Approach to Small Group Communication" and yet devotes a brief five scattered pages to listening, citing it as a communication norm. Equally limited consideration is given to listening in Using Communication by Richard E. Crable which has a section on group communication and devotes a meagre two pages to listening.[9] Another 1979 publication Discussing and Deciding (labeled as a desk book) describes listening to understand, to evaluate, and to provide support. Even so, listening is discussed on only eleven of its 321 pages. To put it another way, less than three percent of the book space is devoted to the topic of listening.[10]

The picture is not much different when we look at Journal articles. Schiedel and Crowell in their "Feedback In Small Group Communication" dismissed the matter of listening with the assumption that "non-listening did not occur with any great frequency and that if it did occur it would be random rather than in a systematic pattern."[11] Leathers in his "Process Disruption and Measurement in Small Group Communication" did deal with the effectiveness of listening and concerned himself with the impact of selected statements.[12] In an earlier article by Schiedel and Crowell the word listening does not appear.[13] Finally, Dennis Gouran in his "Group Communication: Perspectives and Priorities for Future Research" makes no explicit reference to the role of listening.[14]

Now I suspect that, among other things, many of these authors will want to respond by declaring that the way we deal with listening is to treat listening under such captions as "feedback," "summaries," and "contributing in context." In fairness, implications for listening do appear in the consideration of various parts of group process, but the point still needs to be made that what now may appear as

implicit needs to be brought forward and made explicit because it is, in fact, foundational to the whole process and neither vague generalities about listening or subtle implications about listening will do the instructional job.

Poor listening is a serious problem for group process because it disrupts the process while efforts are made to clarify, misdirects the flow of thought, and causes some tasks to be done over and over again. If the fault in the listening is that it focuses on one-on-one communication and does not identify those indicators of cooperative thinking, agreement, and/or consensus, then the listening failure may prove problematic in terms of group-becoming.

Inadequate listening may also weaken ones input into the process because contributions are not timely, are not on target, and redundant, or are not a response to the question that has been asked. All of which may cause others to undervalue the contribution which one is capable of making to the group.

In addition, a poor listener may dampen the enthusiasm of others for contributing because it does not appear that they are really being heard and it may even seem that their contributions tend to send the group in a different direction than the one intended. So listening failure can become a primary cause of poor participation.

An even more serious problem is that poor listening tends to undermine a basic assumption of small group communication, namely, that we need the participation of each member because each has a contribution to make. Leaders should become lead listeners who lead the way in listening to the discussion and provide an example of being alert to the worth of each contribution. Such an emphasis on listening helps participants to think of themselves as involved in a different dynamic than they are involved in when they are the speaker or the lecturer.

My plea is that listening be given a higher priority. More time should be devoted to developing an appreciation

for listening and to acquiring listening skills. As a beginning I recommend that the section on listening (pp. 266-271) in The Dynamics of Discussion by Barnlund and Haiman be made an assigned reading so that students become alerted to avoid listening in order to refute and to avoid making premature judgments, and become appreciative of the need to establish genuine rapport and to step inside the assumptive world of another human being.

Secondly, I suggest the following guidelines for listening when participating in small group communication.

LISTENING GUIDES FOR GROUP PROCESS

1. Listen actively to the concepts contributed by others - mentally process what they have said.
2. Listen with an effort to step inside the assumptive world of another human being. Where are they coming from? What is the personal context for the remarks?
3. Avoid listening in order to refute. Don't be preoccupied with the effort you will make to answer.
4. Avoid listening out of the orientation of a premature judgment.
5. Listen to the whole process - Avoid selective listening.
6. Listen to the whole process as a whole person - be totally present.
7. Listen with an awareness of how this contribution affirms, amplifies, questions, or challenges what has previously been said.
8. Listen with an appreciation for the worth of each contribution - like a detective who does not underestimate the importance of a single clue or a single piece of evidence.
9. Enlist the group's help by asking for their feedback on your report of what you think that you have heard.

10. Listen carefully and accurately. Attend to detail and shadings of meaning.
11. Listen for a time of group readiness to hear what you have to say.
12. Listen for times of group readiness to move to the next step in the pattern of reflective thought.

Thirdly, we need to recognize that listening to a group is different than listening to a lecture by one person and than listening to another person during a conversation or an interview. We need to discover what these differences are and what matters should receive particular attention when we are listening to a group - especially if we want to improve communication in a small group. A process involving inputs from multiple and varied sources requires attention to individual styles and concerns and, at one and the same time, an awareness for the integrative factors that contribute to the dynamic and the wholeness of the group process.

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End Notes (continued)

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